

Interview With José Diaz-Balart of Telemundo

November 4, 2000

Mr. Diaz-Balart. Mr. President, thank you very much for being with us on “Esta Manana.” It’s a pleasure having you.

The President. Glad to do it.

Hispanic Vote and the 2000 Election

Mr. Diaz-Balart. Let’s talk about the importance of November 7th, specifically towards the Latino population of the United States. Why should people who, many times, don’t feel part of this country, and yet are citizens, why should they vote?

The President. Because there are issues at stake that will directly affect themselves, their families, their communities, and our country. There are huge differences in the economic policies of the two candidates.

Obviously, I favor the ones that Vice President Gore and my wife and others have articulated, but there’s the question of whether you think it’s better to pay down the debt, have a smaller tax cut focused on the middle class, and invest more in education, or whether it’s better to have a bigger tax cut, partially privatized Social Security, and have spending that will take us back in debt but give some people more money right now. That will affect everybody. How do you build on the prosperity of the new—of the last 8 years?

Then, there are differences of opinion on crime, on the environment, on health care, on education, and on fairness toward immigrants, which should be a big issue to the Latino population. I and virtually everyone in my party are fighting for the fairness to immigrants act, and the leadership of the Republican Party is opposing us. And so we’re—and we have a simple position, which is that it was right to let people from Cuba and Nicaragua come into this country if they were fleeing dictatorial or violent environments, but we owe the same thing to the people from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, and other places. So I think that’s a big issue.

Then there are issues revolving around whether we should have hate crimes legislation. Should we have stronger laws guaran-

teeing equal pay for women? All these things will drastically affect, one way or the other, what life is like for ordinary Americans.

Voter Apathy

Mr. Diaz-Balart. Why do you think, sir, that the polls show that candidates really haven’t gotten through to all of the voters, that there’s some apathy, and there’s some feeling that, “You know what, I don’t even want to get involved with this?”

The President. I think the main—anybody that doesn’t want to get involved, I think, it’s because the issues aren’t as clear as they should be. But I also think, in a funny way, the general prosperity and sense of well-being of the country could be working against us a little bit. Because people may think, well, you know—younger voters, a lot of them can’t even remember what it was like 8 years ago.

And I think sometimes when times are good, you tend to be more casual about voting and about studying the differences. And then, maybe they—people, I think, do have a negative reaction sometimes to all this—the air wars—not just the Presidential race, but all these ads where they’re attacking each other and all that. That sometimes tends to depress turnout.

But I would hope the American people would actually be in a very good humor. I mean, this has been an essentially positive election. The candidates have been sharply critical of each other on the issues, but there has been surprisingly little personal attack. Governor Bush has, I think, wrongly questioned Vice President Gore’s character a couple of times, but by and large, both of them have run clean, positive campaigns in which they have strongly disagreed with each other on the issues. But that’s what democracy is about. I would think—I think the American people ought to be happy. I mean, the economy is growing; all sectors of the society are benefiting. Crime is down. The environment is cleaner. There are fewer people without health insurance. The schools are getting better.

I think that people should think, “Wow, we’ve got a chance now to really dream big dreams about what we want America to look like over the next 10 years. What should

America's role in the world be over the next 10 years? What is exactly the right thing to do with our projected surplus? And how should we handle all this?" This is, for a citizen who loves democracy, a dream election. We may never have another election like this in our lifetime, where we've got prosperity, social progress, and the absence of crisis at home and threat abroad.

I would just say to the American people, you make a lot of mistakes in life. Sometimes when things are so good, you think it doesn't matter if you concentrate or act. It does matter.

President's Role in 2000 Campaign

Mr. Diaz-Balart. You know, what does surprise me, sir, is that a President with a huge popularity as you do, whose numbers continue to be record-setting as far as anybody is concerned, and yet we don't see you in the battleground States. I don't see you in Michigan. I haven't seen you in Florida. I haven't seen you in Tennessee and even in your home State that much. It surprises me as a journalist. Does it surprise you? Why aren't you there?

The President. Not exactly. I think, first of all, there is a limit to what the President can do in another person's race. I have been out a lot this year. I couldn't go out—I think it would have been actually a negative factor if I had gone out before the Congress went home, because people would think, "What's President Clinton doing trying to tell me how to vote for the next President when he's got a job to do back in Washington?"

Now, when they did go home, I went to California. I spent the day in New York trying to help my wife and our candidates here, and I'm going to spend a day in Arkansas tomorrow, which is a State where I think we're a little bit behind but not too badly. And maybe I can have an impact there.

But I also have done, over the course of this last year, I've been in all those battleground States. I've done 150-plus events for our Congressmen and Senators, every one of them also making the argument for the Vice President. And I cut a lot of radio spots and done some other communications, phone messages, and other things to try to reach swing voters and try to affect the turnout.

But I'm not so sure, if I had been to more places, it would have made a difference in the vote, because I actually have experienced it from the other end. When President Reagan was wildly popular in 1984, he came to Arkansas and campaigned for my opponent. It had no effect on my vote, not at all.

So I've done everything I could do to help the Vice President and Senator Lieberman, and I think that there was a decision made that the best I could do would be to try to articulate a national message, which I can do anywhere—yesterday my speech in California was played live on CNN, for example—and keep the schedule I had set, because I have a unique relationship with Arkansas, and then try to do direct voter contact.

But I want the focus to be on Vice President Gore and Governor Bush. I think the people have to make that decision. All I can do is to help clarify what I think the choice is. You know, the American people have been very good to me, and I've tried to tell them in the last 2 weeks what I think the choice is, and I hope I've had a positive impact.

Perspective on the Presidency

Mr. Diaz-Balart. What would you tell them about these last 8 years for you as a—less as President Clinton and more as Bill Clinton, the man whose dreams, in many ways, came true, and who has had ups and downs?

The President. Well, first of all, I feel an enormous sense of gratitude to the American people. I mean, they gave me a chance to serve, and they sort of took a chance on me at first, because I was the Governor of a small State. I was quite young. I had never served an elected office in Washington. But I had some clear ideas about what I thought we should do. So I feel gratitude.

Secondly, I feel gratitude because they've worked out pretty well. And one of the lessons that I have learned from all this is that it really matters—if you want to run for President, you should have reasons for running that are bigger than yourself, bigger than your desire to do it, because that will sustain you in the tough times. It gives you a game plan. It gives you a way of organizing a team and marshaling the energy of the country.

And of course, the people stayed with me in the tough times, too.

So when I leave office, I will leave grateful for the progress America has made, grateful for the generosity and support of the American people, but I'll also be more idealistic than I was the day I took the oath of office. In spite of all the battles I've been through, I'm more idealistic about the potential of America within our country and the potential of America to have a positive impact around the world than I was when I took office.

Post-Presidential Plans

Mr. Diaz-Balart. How do you plan to channel that optimism and continue trying to make a difference?

The President. I hope that what I can do is to try to trade my job in, which now has an enormous amount of power and authority, but requires me to be involved in literally hundreds of things, and identify four or five big areas that I care passionately about and concentrate my energies there, so that whatever influence I have as a former President, being able to concentrate in fewer areas, I'll still have a positive impact.

I'm still working on the details of how to do that, but I really hope I can do that. I think that I have an obligation to my country and to the people who have been my friends and allies around the world to try to use whatever time and energy I have left in this astonishing, unique experience I've had to make the world a better place, and I'll keep trying.

Mr. Diaz-Balart. Give me an idea, something that may or may not work out, but something that we could be seeing you at.

The President. Well, I'm very interested in the economic empowerment of poor people. That's something I've worked on here at home with our empowerment zone programs, with our community development institutions, making loans to people who couldn't get them otherwise, and something that my wife and I have worked on around the world.

Last year, through our AID programs, we made 2 million small microenterprise loans in Latin America and Africa and in poorer countries in Asia. I think one of the problems

with democracy is, it's hard for it to take root if people don't feel any tangible benefits.

In Latin America today, we have some countries where democracy is more fragile partly because they haven't felt the benefits. One of the problems we have in the Middle East today, with all the tension in the West Bank and Gaza, is that many Palestinians are not better off today economically than they were when we signed the peace agreement way back in 1993. And we have to do a better job in the world of merging politics and economics. So that's one area that I'm very interested in.

Middle East Peace Process

Mr. Diaz-Balart. We'll talk about the Middle East real quick before we go to Latin America, which is a subject dear to our viewers' hearts. Some critics have said that the United States, your administration, has been so keen on pushing for some kind of concessions on both sides, that maybe it's become an American agenda in the Middle East, versus the Americans acting as brokers and as objective people who can help the system.

The President. I don't think that's a fair criticism. Here's why. We, all along, have basically facilitated what the parties wanted to do. Now, when we met at Camp David, we met knowing that there might not be an agreement. But we did it because both parties were afraid that they were coming up on the September deadline for the declaration of a Palestinian state without an agreement, and that without further progress on these tough issues, we might have a real mess there, even worse than what we've been through.

So what I tried to do was to explore—when they reach an impasse, I did what President Carter did, way back at Camp David I, between Israel and Egypt. If they reach an impasse, then you can offer an idea to see if both sides will take it. But it can never be America's agenda. All we can ever do is try to be an honest and fair broker, because we don't have to live with the consequences. The people that have to live with the consequences are the Israelis and the Palestinians. So for us to try to force something on them is a grave mistake.

On the other hand, the consequences of not making peace have been evident these last 3 or 4 weeks over there. And they are just horrible. So we should nudge them when we can, and as long as both sides trust us, we can nudge them without them thinking it's our agenda, because they know when they have to get off—they know when they can't do something.

Cuba

Mr. Diaz-Balart. This January will mark the 42d anniversary of Castro in power, the longest lasting dictator. Why haven't you helped the internal dissident movement in Cuba like, let's say, Reagan did for Poland?

The President. Well, I don't know what else we could have done. I believe I could have done a lot more if the Cuban Democracy Act had been left intact. And the Cuban community in Florida, for example, and in New Jersey, strongly supported the Cuban Democracy Act. I think we could have done a lot more for the dissident movement in Cuba because we would have been in a position to have carrots and sticks in return for openness and change, and we could have supported them.

But when Castro's air force murdered those Brothers to the Rescue people in the two airplanes, shot them down completely illegally, we had to have some sort of response. The Congress passed the Helms-Burton bill. I signed it, but it tied the hands of the executives so much that it's hard for us to use the full panoply of pressures we had.

For example, let's just take Kosovo—I mean Serbia. We just had an election in Serbia, Mr. Kostunica. We could put a lot of money into a democratic election there, but we also had something to offer them if they won. I had the power to immediately suspend the embargo, to do other things. We had an embargo on them that was very tough, but I always had the flexibility to use carrots and sticks.

I think it's a great mistake, and I hope the next Congress will correct it, to put the President in a position where he can promote positive change in Cuba, because the Congress believes the only way it can show it's anti-Castro is to make sure that the President has no leverage. The Congress just adopted

another bill that I think was a mistake. They put it in the Agriculture bill, and I had no choice but to sign it. The bill purported to sell—allow more food sales to Cuba, but because it doesn't have any financing mechanism, there won't be any food sales. The real purpose of the bill was to further restrict the ability of Americans to travel to Cuba and have person-to-person contact. I think that's a mistake, because I think it again—we have no plans to invade Cuba. If there's not going to be a military invasion of Cuba, then what you need is a balance of carrots and sticks.

I am disappointed that Castro is still in power. I am disappointed that democracy has not been restored to Cuba. I am glad that we have had a very tough line these last 8 years. I wish we could have done better. But I think that it is a mistake—I think the Cuban Democracy Act was right. That was the right concept—more sticks and more carrots, more flexibility. Get in there and find the people in Cuba that are promoting democracy, that are promoting free markets, that are promoting freedom of speech, that are politically opposed to the communist regime, and find ways to support them. And find ways to give power to just ordinary people doing all kinds of things that are inconsistent with a total communist dictatorship.

And I hope that we'll—he can't last forever. Nobody lives forever, for one thing. And I don't think that the system is sustainable without him, but I would like to see change before then. I know even in Miami and in New Jersey, I hear more and more discussion among my friends in the Cuban communities about what else we could do. I wish we could have done better. I do think the next President should be given more tools. If we want to try to move toward freedom quicker, we've got to give the President more tools to deal with.

Mexico

Mr. Diaz-Balart. One of the good stories coming out of Latin America is this election in Mexico with Vicente Fox winning the PRI after 70-something years.

The President. Great story.

Mr. Diaz-Balart. Tell me how that's—the influence you think or the impact of that story on—not only on the United States—

Mexico relations but also on Latin America in general.

The President. Well, first of all, I think it's a great credit to the people of Mexico that they had an honest election, that it was carried off in a forthright way. It is secondly a great credit to Ernesto Zedillo, because he, first of all, opened his own party's Presidential nomination up to a broader popular choice, and secondly, he basically assured an honest election to make politics competitive in Mexico.

So I think President Zedillo will go down in history for many things in a positive way. He had a very good economic policy, but he also had the courage to give up his own party's monopoly of power. And he knew what he was doing when he opened the system.

Then thirdly, I think it's a tribute to Mr. Fox. He's a very engaging, compelling man. He's an interesting man. He's a—

Mr. Diaz-Balart. Charismatic.

The President. Very charismatic. He lives on a ranch. He showed me the boots he was wearing he said were made in a boot factory on his own ranch. His children still, by and large, live on the ranch. I think one of them lives in Mexico City now. He's a very impressive man.

And what I hope will happen is that when he takes office, I hope that the PRI will try to cooperate with him, will try to work with him, will give him a chance to succeed, because one of the problems that a new President faces, if your party has never been in power, or if your party has been out of power a very long time—that even happens here sometimes; we faced some of those challenges when I came in—is, you have to put together a team that not only is smart and knowledgeable on policy but also can figure out how to work through the political culture of a country, in this case Mexico's political culture, which has never before had a President of another party.

So I would hope that since Mexico has one-term Presidencies, the PRI has nothing to lose by helping Mr. Fox succeed and giving him a chance to do good for Mexico. If he makes a mistake, he'll have to live with the consequences, like we all do. But I think that America has a big interest in the success of Mexico, and I think the PRI will rise in

the esteem of the public if they are seen to be a constructive force there. So this will be an interesting test for them because they've never been like this before, either. I like Mexico's chances for the future. I think they're—I, personally, believe their biggest problem is the same thing Columbia is facing but on a smaller scale. The narcotraffickers have so much loose money to throw around in countries that are poor, and have so much power to throw around in communities and areas where the power structure is weak, that that's a real test for Mexico and its democracy.

But it's basically, I think, Mexico is moving in the right direction and deserves a lot of the world's applause for what's happened there.

Immigration

Mr. Diaz-Balart. In interviews with "Esta Manana," both Governor Bush and Vice President Gore have said that a lot needs to be done as far as how INS handles the Mexicans who try to reach this country for a better life for themselves and for their family. They both have said that they failed to—there's not enough, maybe, human respect towards families that are divided, people who are sent back without any kind of sensitivity towards their cases. Would you agree with that?

The President. Oh, yes. I think there are several problems with the INS. But I think, first, there's the whole issue of how we deal with controlling our borders and immigrants that come here without legal sanction. And then there's the question of how we handle those who are eligible for naturalization and how long they have to wait and how they're treated while they're waiting.

The Vice President headed up a task force for us back in '96 to try to dramatically speed the naturalization process, and we did—you remember we did a project in Miami and in several other cities. We got an enormous amount of criticism from the Congress, I think, because they thought that immigrants would be more likely to be Democratic voters, although one of the reasons we did it in Miami was because, as you know, Cuban-American voters normally tend to vote for Republicans for President. And we wanted to demonstrate that we weren't trying to be

partisan. What we wanted to do was to make the INS work better, for people who were eligible for naturalization.

Now, for people who are trying to get in the country, it's a genuine dilemma, because every nation has to have some control over its borders and some limits on immigration. And if you ignore those entirely, with regard to Mexico, because of our long history and the culture of the Rio Grande Valley and all of that you know very well, then you're sort of really hurting those people that wait their turn in line.

So I think what we need is a little better treatment. We need to review the quota. We need to make sure that people are treated right, and then we need to examine whether or not we need to do more on the family unification front. As you know, that's one of things we're fighting for in the Latino immigrant fairness legislation before Congress now, is trying to do a little more on family reunification, because it seems to me that America ought to be a pro-family country. We ought to let people be together, and that's another reason I'm fighting for the Liberians, too. You may be familiar with that case and the Liberian immigrants.

I will say this: I think, on balance, the Government works a lot better than it did when I got here, but I am disappointed that I have not made more improvements in the Immigration and Naturalization Service. So both Governor Bush and the Vice President are right, and I'm glad that they have both committed to focus on it.

Post-Presidential Plans

Mr. Diaz-Balart. My last question is, here's a kid who goes to the White House and meets President Kennedy, then later as a grown man is saying hello to kids on that same lawn. Here's a political animal who has studied all his life politics, history. I see you out there on the line, and you seem to be the last guy who wants to be there. The people who have shook your hand leave before you do, because you want to say hello and touch everybody out there. How in the heck are you going to do—what are you going to do after this? Here's a guy who—you're a young guy, and all your life you've done this,

and I see you out there. Now what? What happens?

The President. I do love politics, and I also love public service. I will miss the job of being President even more than the political events, even more than living in the White House, which has been a profound honor. But you know, it is our system, and it's probably a pretty good system, that a person just gets to be President for 8 years, if you're lucky. So I have to do what I've done before at several points in my life. I have to start a new life and figure out how to use the life I've lived to good effect in building a new life.

And I won't have to stop being a citizen of America or a citizen of the world; I just won't be the candidate any more. I hope I'll be a member of the Senate spouses' club after Tuesday. I told Vice President Gore that if he got elected, I would do whatever he wanted me to do, anything from coming in to talk or going to funerals. I'd do whatever I was asked to do.

I've done this. I'm grateful. I'm not going to stop being an interested citizen, but I have to make a new life. I just hope it will be one that will be of some use to my country.

Mr. Diaz-Balart. Mr. President, thank you very much. I appreciate you being with us on "Esta Manana."

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 5:10 p.m. at the African Square Plaza for later broadcast, and the transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on November 9. In his remarks, the President referred to Republican Presidential candidate Gov. George W. Bush; President Fidel Castro of Cuba; President Vojislav Kostunica of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro); and President Vicente Fox and former President Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Statement on Signing the Energy Act of 2000

November 9, 2000

Today I have signed into law H.R. 2884, the "Energy Act of 2000." This Act extends